

Testimony of Vee Daniel

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“Fraud, Scams and COVID-19: How con artists have targeted older Americans during the pandemic”

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Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Tim Scott, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of, “Fraud Scams and COVID-19: How con artists have targeted older Americans during the pandemic.”

My name is Vee Daniel, I’m a Catawba College Communication Major graduate, mother of an early childhood teacher, intern architect, and a new grandmother. I’ll be celebrating my 30th wedding anniversary this year.

I serve as president and CEO of the Better Business Bureau of the Upstate and Better Business Bureau Education Foundation, a position I’ve held since 2011. BBB is a nonprofit promoting trust between consumers and businesses in the marketplace and has been around for more than 100 years. When I first was offered the job, I was intrigued. I grew up with a father who was a huge advocate for BBB. When his friends needed assistance with customer service issues, he would always say “call the BBB.”

With a few weeks on the job, I received an invitation to speak to a senior church group about the latest scams. I will never forget the day I spoke to those seniors and listened to their scam stories. It was heartbreaking. I learned to speak louder, ask questions, listen, and the most important part was realizing **education** is the key to fighting senior fraud. That’s when I knew this role with the BBB was the perfect fit for me. Since that day, I’ve never turned down an opportunity to speak to educate seniors. In 2015, we dubbed the program “Savvy Seniors,” because that’s what we want to achieve.

During the pandemic, we witnessed new scams that involved masks, non-FDA approved medical supplies, immunity boosting products, and equipment through online purchase scams relating to COVID-19. We have also seen fake websites, phishing emails that involved stimulus checks, price gouging, scammers impersonating government agencies like Medicare, and promoting fake vaccines. We have also seen an increase in romance scams during COVID-19.

The BBBs across the country rallied together to put out fraud prevention messages and we did thousands of media interviews to try to warn consumers about all the COVID-related scams we were seeing.

Senior groups were not able to meet during COVID-19, so we partnered with our local Appalachian Council of Governments Greenville office and Meals on Wheels to distribute 1,000 BBB Savvy Senior packets that included educational information on fraud and scams.

As part of a larger national effort, BBB of the Upstate has hosted Secure Your ID Day since 2008. Local BBBs from all across the United States and Canada join in on the event designed to protect consumers from the growing threat of identity theft and provide education. Consumers and businesses are encouraged to attend the free community service events and properly shred and destroy sensitive documents. In 2018, BBB of the Upstate partnered with AARP South Carolina and from that partnership we have increased our shred events from 4 to now 8 events a year. Last week, we held two events, one

in Greenville and one in Anderson, with two happening in October in Spartanburg and Simpsonville. About 90% of the attendees are seniors.

[BBB Scam Tracker](#) is an online platform that enables consumers and businesses to report scams and suspicious activities. The data is analyzed and reports are then made available to the general public, thus empowering consumers to avoid losing money to scammers. The website features a searchable "heat map" so users can view the number, types, and details about scams reported in their communities. BBB Scam Tracker data enables local BBBs to educate consumers and stop fraudsters by leveraging the power of technology and our network of BBBs serving communities throughout North America and Canada.

[Using data from BBB Scam Tracker](#), our foundation, the BBB Institute for Marketplace Trust released a report on the rise of online scams during the Covid-19 pandemic. The BBB Risk Index is a formula that looks at scams in a different way: the volume of each type of scam reported to BBB Scam Tracker, the susceptibility rate (that is, how many people who are exposed to the scam actually lose money), and the dollar loss. That formula shows us which scams are the riskiest, and it may not be for the scam with the most reports. For instance, romance scams were the riskiest for ages 55 through 64, followed by online purchase scams and investments scams. Travel/vacation/timeshare scams were the riskiest for ages 65+, followed by online purchase scams and romance scams.

Since BBB began tracking scams in this way in 2016, we've seen a clear pattern: although seniors are pretty savvy and tend to fall for scams less frequently than younger demographic groups, they lose more money. This is partly because the type of scams that target seniors -- romance scams, investment scams, family emergency scams -- tend to be higher dollar amounts. Although many seniors have gotten the message and are more cautious than in the past, too many are still falling victim to unscrupulous criminals. BBB is proud of the role we play in educating seniors and all consumers, but there is much more that can be done and we appreciate the attention this issue is getting.

Thank you for this opportunity to be a witness today on this relevant topic of how con artists have targeted older Americans during the pandemic.